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ABSTRACT

This factsheet describes a theater workshop in London, England, called Chicken Shed, in which children with and without disabilities or learning difficulties work together to produce performances for public audiences. The factsheet describes the members of the theater workshop, the group's philosophy, the opportunities it offers, the impact of integration on workshop members and staff, and the progress which has been made through an emphasis on team work and a recognition of key components of successful integrated theater. Chicken Shed developed its first integrated workshop session in 1982, by having children with disabilities work alongside older members on a one-to-one basis. As the students developed skills and confidence, they were integrated into their age groups within the mainstream workshop sessions. The workshop's principles emphasize equality of opportunity, respect for individual differences, and dedication to striving for high standards for all. Numerous black and white photographs illustrate the text. (JDD)

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FACTSHEET

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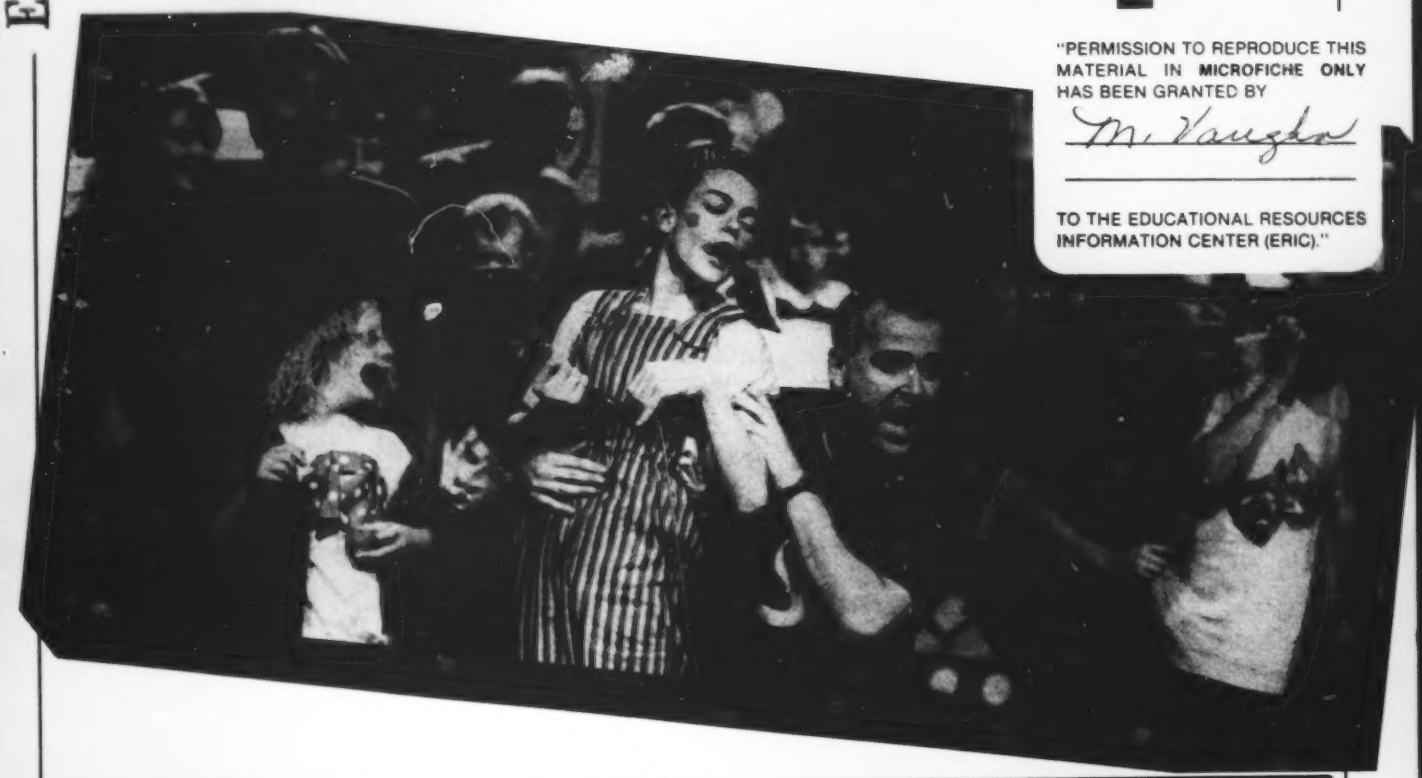
Chicken Shed integrated theatre workshop



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SUMMARY

How can children with and without disabilities or difficulties in learning work together to produce performances which play to capacity audiences in London's West End?

This factsheet about an integrated theatre workshop called Chicken Shed opens with a description of the group by members themselves.

It then goes on to look at the background to the decision to integrate, the group's philosophy and working methods, the opportunities it offers, and the progress which has been made.

The principles of equality, respect, and commitment on which Chicken Shed is founded are the same principles inspiring efforts to end segregated special education for children with disabilities or difficulties in learning.

Integration in the theatre and integration in the classroom have many worthwhile lessons to share.

CSIE has compiled this report after attending Chicken Shed workshops and performances, and talking with members and staff.

Photographs by Brian Shuel

After years of silence...

"Chicken Shed is a theatre workshop where all the work is our own. We have the ideas. We write the words. We compose the tunes and sing the songs. We play the music. We build the sets and light the lights. We sew the costumes, and we wear them. We are the performers.

When you see a Chicken Shed production, we're the ones who are making it happen.

After Chicken Shed some of us make it to drama school, and then to a career in the performing arts.

Others have no such ambitions. We participate in Chicken Shed for the inspiration that theatre gives, for the joy of communication, for the sake of learning — and just for fun. Some achieve a kind of dramatic greatness. After years of silence we talk and sing. After a lifetime of handicap we act and dance. We show the world that no-one is without ability. Everyone has the capacity to transmit pleasure and love.

Theatre as art, theatre as enjoyment, theatre as therapy — no other theatre workshop does what Chicken Shed does.

Our director's name is Mary Ward and Jo Collins is our music director. We have dedicated teachers of dance, acting, music, mime and improvisation. And we have ourselves. Those with the greatest experience help those with the least. Those whose talents may be evident, help draw out the hidden talents in others.

Between us, we're making things happen."

● *Mary Ward, Director, at a rehearsal.*

A wider range of abilities

Like other important aspects of Chicken Shed's nature, integration grew from within the group — a consequence of members' needs and attitudes.

This North London youth theatre workshop — named after the old barn where members used to hold their get-togethers — opened in 1974 on a theatre-for-all basis with no fees and no entry qualifications.

After six years of steady progress it seemed appropriate to discuss future directions, including how to involve young people with a wider range of abilities. Members had been impressed by the skills of a boy with spina bifida whose walking had improved since he joined the group. They asked themselves, if Chicken Shed was for everyone, where were the other young people with similar difficulties?

'Our kids were having such a good time, it struck them we should be doing more for other people', says director Mary Ward. 'First the idea was to go out and entertain, but then they asked why couldn't these kids with difficulties come in and join the group?'

Why indeed? The group decided to start an extra workshop session in which children who had disabilities or difficulties worked alongside older members on a one-to-one basis. It was agreed that severity or type of disability should not be a barrier and that the workshop would cater for the full range.

Cheviots, a children's centre in nearby Enfield, was approached directly by Mary Ward and responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to participate in an integration scheme. Members from the two organisations met and Chicken Shed's first integrated workshop session took place in 1982. The work has been developing ever since. Chicken Shed finds that all children, whatever their ability, benefit from opportunities for self development and self-fulfilment.

Basic principles

One of Chicken Shed's greatest assets is a strong value base. Its publications and its members speak openly about principles of equality of opportunity, respect for individual differences and dedication to striving for high standards for all.

These same principles are also fundamental to efforts to end segregated education for children with disabilities or who experience difficulties in learning. In fact, integration in the theatre and integration in the classroom have important lessons to share.

One of Chicken Shed's strongest convictions is that all human beings have something to offer each other and that it is essential for everyone to have an opportunity to give. Chicken Shed sees drama and music as an ideal medium for giving, sharing and making friends.

Rooted in this philosophical background is a very clear message to every individual in Chicken Shed. Members are not there to 'do good' or to be 'looked after' or to be 'helped'. They are there to play their part in the production of high standard dramatic and musical performances — 'to give', as people at Chicken Shed like to say.

The list of ways of giving is long and varied. One person may be able to dance but have no comic timing. Another may remember lines of dialogue, but be unable to sing. One may need support in moving across the stage, another in sitting still. It is all part of a natural process in which difficulties are normal. What matters is aiming high so that all members are enabled to give their best.

'We believe in everyone raising their ceiling', says Mary Ward. 'It's important to provide for every level of ability'.

Integration begins

Chicken Shed opened in 1974 with a mixed age group; as this original group expanded it split into three age groups — juniors, middles, and the Company for those over 16 who want to take standards and commitment a step further.

Eight years later, in 1982, when Chicken Shed started including children with disabilities or difficulties, a similar pattern developed. At first a mixed age group was established, supported by senior members of the Company, later splitting into different sections. This became known as the Wednesday group.

From the start Chicken Shed was aware of the danger of the Wednesday group becoming a separate, special group, and of its members risking being isolated from the mainstream organisation. To counteract this tendency a firm goal was set of full integration throughout the organisation, as soon as possible.

In the meantime the maximum integration possible was pursued at all times. Students who developed their skills transferred to the mainstream, easy movement was encouraged between the Wednesday group and other groups and all groups performed together, and on their own.

Ideally it would have been best if the students could have been integrated into their peer groups straight away with the support they needed coming from their peers. But, at this stage of development, the direct amalgamation of a small group of students who had received limited opportunity to develop skills and confidence with several hundred members of Chicken Shed who had limited experience of disability, was unlikely to be effective. A bridge was needed in the form of the Wednesday group to bring them together and facilitate integration.

By the beginning of 1989, seven years after integration began, the supporting bridge was considered largely unnecessary. Integration took a major step forward with the vast majority of the Wednesday Group — more than 40 members — joining their peers.

At this point the total number of staff and members in Chicken Shed was just over three hundred; integration took place at a ratio of roughly one to eight. There are waiting lists in each age group of children and young people.

● *Members of Chicken Shed with two of the theatre workshop's patrons, Judi Dench and Michael Williams.*

Overcoming unhelpful concepts

Initial reaction to the move was that the newly integrated juniors came together with few difficulties. The middles, who included children with up to ten years of segregated schooling behind them, had more problems getting used to each other and overcoming unhelpful concepts and attitudes which built up during those years of separation.

As for the impact on the staff the challenge has been seen as one of creative direction and teaching imaginative enough to cater for diversity. The extra resource of one-to-one support was now available from Company members for any student who needed it.

A small number of older students who have the longest history of segregation, look less likely to complete the transfer to the Chicken Shed mainstream. They will probably continue to need intensive one-to-one support and therapy in a new workshop catering for their needs.

Mary Ward says that Chicken Shed may have to accept that, because of the way society operates at present, it has some members who are unable to join the mainstream on a full-time basis. She regards these students more as victims of their segregated education than of their disabilities or difficulties. And she is hoping that in future, Chicken Shed juniors who have had experience of integration from an early age, will not be in the same situation.

One of the main factors she is expecting will make a difference is that up-and-coming juniors with disabilities or difficulties will have had the crucial opportunity to learn how to behave in a mainstream environment, which at the same time is becoming more receptive to them.

'The so called physical or intellectual handicap is really irrelevant as far as integration is concerned, but when behaviour is bizarre, that's a different matter. Coping with highly withdrawn or highly excitable behaviour which has been allowed to continue unaddressed for a long time is very difficult within the confines of the performing arts and trying to produce a show.

'Kids who have been to special schools are not taught how to behave in a mainstream situation. They have always been treated as "different" and have not been expected to mix with their non-disabled peers. Our seven to nine year olds with disabilities or learning difficulties will be mixing with their peers, and hopefully, will always be able to join in with the mainstream.

'Shadow' support

The intensive one-to-one support available to students is so close that Company members offering this relationship are often called their 'shadows'. They support students during exercises, discussions and improvisations and also accompany them on stage for performance.

Physical contact between students and 'shadows' during workshop sessions is regarded as vital. By gentle touchings and promptings students are enabled to follow the teacher at the same time as sharing a kind of intimacy which many have missed.

For the teacher, the use of 'shadows' means that he or she can effectively approach more students than could possibly be managed alone. Reaching out from teachers through the 'shadows' to each individual student and back again, proved a good way to establish communication, build relationships and put on a performance.

The movement of most of the original Wednesday group of students into their mainstream peer groups is a measure of how abilities and confidence developed over the years, and of how the need for one-to-one support declined. Successive productions of the Wednesday Group also mirrored this blossoming independence. For example, in one of the last productions before the 1989 re-organisation, a young woman who has Down's Syndrome played a lead role opposite a young man who is a professional actor. He was no longer her 'shadow'. Each had their own part and was expected to perform to the best of their ability.

Chicken Shed's way of responding to disabilities or difficulties is to incorporate different levels of support into a workshop or production ranging from intense shadow support to more minimal assistance, right through to independence. People can work together as perhaps 'King and Servant'. If a student's movements need supporting, new characters can be created to meet those needs. In the Chicken Shed version of *Alice in Wonderland* Alice, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare moved around the tea-table with the help of 'woodland creatures' who joined the party.

Team work

Chicken Shed's approach to building a production is very much a team-work approach. All the materials — from the words and music to the costumes and sets — are supplied from within the group. All the specifications are discussed and developed by members. And because people have been deeply involved, the final production is truly their own. The exact format varies from show to show but generally contains the following key elements.

First there is the presentation of an idea by the director of that particular show. This may be an entirely original piece or one based on a well-known work to be adapted by the performers. Improvisation sessions follow based around ideas and incidents contained in the story. Characters are discussed — even invented and developed.

Improvisation sessions often take place over many weeks, as this is where major building of the show occurs. The final shape of the production will depend a lot on the outcome of this exploratory work.

Later the director produces a story-board or basic structure, leaving it to the performers — now well warmed up — to think what they would say in the various situations which have been outlined. People write their own scripts in their own words. Lyrics for the songs are produced and the music composed. In this flexible, evolution of a production it is not difficult to include all children. They all have a place because they have built a structure which fits them, instead of having to fit in themselves. They work with teachers in drama and dance, musicians and experts in all branches of theatre.

The Chicken Shed Theatre Workshop Charitable Trust has seven trustees, nine patrons, a management team, an administrator, a production team, a fundraising team, and legal, financial and public relations consultants. Parents and friends are encouraged to support and contribute to fundraising and productions.

Chicken Shed's long-term plan is to move out of shared church hall premises into its own purpose-built theatre. Once re-established in its own home it wants to grow into a pioneering, fully integrated drama centre running new day-time courses, as well as expanding its present evening activities. The group aspires to create a diverse galaxy of stars — and no victims.

In the newly integrated peer groups, the support needed most of the time is not expected to be any greater than that shared among colleagues involved in any co-operative enterprise. And in the same way, the task of directors and teachers is not expected to be so different either. The creative direction or teaching required to stretch the able and — at the same time — support the less able, is no more than an extension of current methods of responding to the wide range of abilities already existing in the mainstream.

Chicken Shed finds many different ways of making things happen as members strive for greater participation and fulfilment for all.

In view of this sincere intention to progress, it came as a shock when what was regarded as one of Chicken Shed's most important steps in integration was not recognised as such. Well before the integrated workshops were established Wednesday Group members had worked with their peers in performance. Officials from a funding organisation, professing an interest in integration, were invited to a show but walked out half-way through, believing they had been misled. They did not recognise any of the children taking part as being disabled or having difficulties.

This was a communication problem, of course, and one which was soon cleared up. But the incident did raise questions about perceptions of disability and whether there are strong pressures in society to maintain a visible, disabled minority. Certainly many of Chicken Shed's performers felt that on that occasion there seemed to be more interest in disability than ability and an apparent unwillingness to see the so-called 'handicapped' become 'normal'.

Mary Ward is very concerned that there should be no misunderstanding about the status of Chicken Shed. She says it would make a nonsense of what members believe in if they became known as a special needs theatre group.

'We have to gain a reputation as a theatre group putting on as high a standard of work as any other theatre company. We don't want to be known as a special needs group where people come with pre-conceived ideas about the poor little handicapped kids. If that happened we would be continuing the segregation'.

Opportunities at Chicken Shed

Communication

Chicken Shed gives young people the opportunity to practice and develop their communication skills in an atmosphere of relaxed enjoyment. In order to function in the group they must develop: awareness of others; the ability to follow instructions; the ability and the motivation to express themselves, and the experience of sharing their own ideas and feelings.

Self Confidence

Chicken Shed provides the opportunity to take new steps and improve self-confidence, to display talent and achievement and have them acknowledged.

Leisure

Chicken Shed gives back to young people the responsibility for their own leisure-time instead of making them passive receivers of entertainment. By being part of a group where co-operation is essential, they also become aware of their responsibility to give pleasure and support others.

Creative development

Music and drama allow people to experience a sense of creativity and an opportunity to express feelings and emotions in imagined situations. As well as building performances Chicken Shed builds people. Experience has shown that in many cases an involvement in creativity can substantially affect the whole quality of a person's life.

Specific skills

Through dance, singing, mime, learning lines, improvisations and playing instruments, young people learn new skills and improve their existing ones. The motivation to perform well will often spur people on to achieve things that previously seemed impossible.

Chicken Shed's Integration Checklist

Key Components to Integrated Theatre

Support

Availability of one-to-one support for children with disabilities or difficulties in learning is vital. As a start this will probably be older children supporting the younger ones, progressing to less intensive support from their peers.

Equality of purpose

All members need to be involved in a common task and aiming for a common goal. The task of all members of Chicken Shed is the same: to give the best of what they are able in pursuit of high standards of dramatic and musical performance. They are not members of the group to 'do good' or to be 'looked after'. They are there to perform to the best of their ability.

Normality of disability

Although integration needs to be fully explained it is not helpful to make disability an issue. Disability is a normal part of life and integration is a normal development for a theatre workshop. It is not something special. Treat children with disabilities or difficulties as normal and do not label them. Supporting them is part of the normal support that all involved in performing need to give and receive.

Ability before disability

It is important to concentrate on what a person can do, rather than what a person cannot do. The confidence gained in doing something well is a powerful aid to overcoming other problems.

Creative direction and teaching

Stretching the able and supporting the less able together, requires creative direction and teaching. But this is not so special. It is an extension of current methods of responding to the wide range of abilities already existing in the mainstream.

Further information

To find out more about Chicken Shed contact: **Chicken Shed Theatre Company**, 62, Grovelands Road, Palmers Green, London N13 4RH (01-882 6345).
For further information about **CSIE** and a full list of publications contact the Centre at the address below.

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